

October 1, 2010

United States Congress Passes Resolution Calling on Turkey to Protect Religious Sites in Occupied Cyprus

WASHINGTON — October 1, 2010 — The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously adopted a resolution (H. Res. 1631) this week calling for the protection of religious sites in the Turkish-occupied areas of The Republic of Cyprus. The bipartisan resolution was introduced by U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), Co-chairman of the Congressional Hellenic Caucus. The resolution had 27 cosponsors including the Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Ranking Member of the committee.

“This measure highlights the continued violations that are taking place in Cyprus even as it celebrates the 50th anniversary of its independence, which is certainly a milestone, but is also a reminder that roughly one-third of Cyprus has been under Turkish military occupation for more than 35 years,” Bilirakis said.

The resolution also urges the Turkish government to protect the cultural and religious heritage of Greek Cypriots living in the occupied areas of the country, who have been prohibited from worshiping freely due to restricted access to religious sites and the continued destruction of the property of the Church of Cyprus. In a statement, Rep. Bilirakis urged the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to investigate and make recommendations on violations of religious freedoms. He also called on Turkey to “remove its troops from Cyprus, remove its settlers, and come to the negotiating table in good faith to find a solution that is just for the Cypriot people.”

“We commend the U.S. House of Representatives for passing this important resolution, which sheds light on the destruction of Cyprus’ cultural heritage in the Turkish-occupied territory,” said Pavlos Anastasiades, Ambassador of Cyprus to the United States. “The ongoing plundering of religious sites in the Turkish-occupied northern region of Cyprus is an outrage and a clear violation of international law. By raising awareness of this issue internationally, we hope we can make progress in protecting the precious historical artifacts that are being threatened by the ongoing Turkish military occupation of Cyprus.”

In 2002, and again in 2007, the U.S. and Cyprus signed a Memorandum of Understanding to impose import restrictions on categories of Pre-Classical and Classical archaeological objects, as well as Byzantine period ecclesiastical and ritual ethnological materials, from Cyprus.

Cyprus is home to priceless icons, mosaics and frescoes — many dating back to the eighth century A.D. These artifacts have adorned churches, chapels, monasteries and numerous archaeological sites located throughout the island. However, since the 1974 invasion, thousands of these sacred religious and cultural icons have been destroyed, looted or vandalized. Many have been stolen and illegally sold for profit abroad. In the Turkish-

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occupied northern third of the nation, 520 Greek Orthodox churches and chapels and 17 monasteries have been pillaged, vandalized or destroyed, or converted into bars, nightclubs, casinos or hotels. More than 15,000 ecclesiastical items are unaccounted for and the report estimates that more than 60,000 ancient artifacts have been illegally transferred to other countries.

Earlier this week, The President of the Republic of Cyprus, Demetris Christofias inaugurated "Cyprus: Crossroads of Civilizations" a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. The exhibition marks the 50th anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Cyprus and features artifacts from nearly 11,000 years of history. The exhibition features more than 200 artifacts that range from items from the earliest villages to masterpieces of medieval religious art and give an overview of the island's unique culture.

*This press release is being distributed by Qorvis Communications on behalf of the Embassy of the Republic of Cyprus.
Additional information is available at the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C.*